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TENSE, ASPECT AND THE BUSCONDUCTOR HINES - THE LITERARY FUNCTION OF NON-STANDARD LANGUAGE IN THE FICTION OF JAMES KELMAN

Liam Rodger (DAL)

Abstract

The fiction of James Kelman is clearly not written in standard literary English. This paper examines some of the different ways in which the language of his novels and stories diverges from standard English, and discusses the extent to which these divergences contribute to his stated literary aims. It will be argued that Kelman, in his fiction, is developing a literary language which is neither 'standard' nor 'dialect', but trades on both in pursuit of specific literary ends.

1. Introduction

1.1 The fiction of James Kelman

The recent writing of James Kelman, and particularly his novels, has excited considerable comment on the issue of his use of "dialect".[1] This has ranged from the perhaps apocryphal story of a Booker Prize judge expressing astonishment at a novel "written in Glasgow dialect" being entered for the competition, to more scholarly remarks in approval of the innovative use of dialect as a narrative medium.

This paper aims to provide a preliminary exploration of the issue of Kelman's use of dialect in literary narrative by relating such use to the author's declared intentions, and analysing sections of text in the light of these.

1.2 Dialect in narrative fiction: options

There are a number of contrasting ways in which non-standard dialect might make its appearance in a fictional text. Perhaps the commonest is "dialect as special guest". The use of non-standard forms occurs only in dialogue, so the utterances of the non-standard dialect speaker are in sharp contrast with the surrounding narrative text, lexically, grammatically and/or orthographically. There may be a contrast between the language of such speakers and that of other characters, who may use, in their utterances, a language much more closely identifiable with the language of the narrative text. In sum, here the non-standard dialect appears in island-like chunks in a sea of standard-variety prose. Whether the dialect-speaker is introduced to provide mere local colour or comic relief, or an uplifting blast of old-time peasant virtue, the sociolinguistic point remains: s/he is not 'one of us' - the class of people who read and write novels.

The locus classicus for this use of dialect in Scottish literature is, of course, Scott. Dickens has both comic (e.g. Sam Weller in *Pickwick Papers*) and tragic variants (e.g. Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times*). Hardy, who grew up as a non-standard dialect speaker, is another writer who includes "dialect" speech on this basis. There is a sharp

contrast between the rustic speech of the villagers in a novel such as *Under the Greenwood Tree* and the circumambient fustian novelese which Hardy adopted for his narrative.

A second possibflity (covering a wide range of potential variation) is for the narrative prose to begin to take on the characteristics of the dialect of the characters. The best known examples of this type in the Scottish literature of this century are the *Scots Quair* novels by Grassic Gibbon. The distance created by standard dialect prose narrative constantly being set against the non-standard dialect speech of the characters is thus avoided - albeit at the cost of what might at first seem a certain quaintness or preciosity about the text. Local instances of the narrative text "taking on" dialect features can also be found in Dickens.

A variant of this approach is found in multiple-narrator novels, where we are taught to identify the distinctive 'voice' of different characters. In such texts, however, non-standard features of the language are then identified with the thought- and speech-styles of the characters - the authority of standard-variety 'objective' language may not be directly challenged, or may even be used elsewhere in the text. In contrast, part of the power and resonance of Gibbon's narrative style in *Sunset Song* comes from the reader's frequent uncertainty as to the source of the narrative voice - is it the 'voice' of Chris, the main character, of an unidentified gossip, or is it representative of the community consensus? At any rate, by eschewing the authority and impersonality which would be conferred by adherence to the standard language, the narrative voice pointedly does not establish a position which is set over against the characters of the novel and their world.

A further move away from standard narrative text is instanced by the consistent use of marked dialect lexis, grammar and phonology (the last through orthography) in the narrative prose as well as the dialogue. Novel-length texts of this type are rare, but Tom Leonard's *Honest* (collected in *Intimate Voices*) is a short discursive text in this mode, while James Kelman's *Nice to be nice* (in *Not not while the Giro*) is a narrative monologue in this fashion. Here the radical divergence from the standard norm is clear in every line:

> A hid tae stoap 2 flerrs up tae git ma breath back. A'm no as bad as A wis bit A'm still no right; that bronchitis - Jesus Christ, A hid it bad. Hid tae stoap work cause iv it. Good joab A hid tae, the lorry drivin. Hid tae chuck it bit.
>
> (31)

Such works are often given the accolade of tour de force - perhaps because it is felt that using dialect to produce a text of interest to the standard-literate must in itself be a rare achievement - what other literary use could it have but as the occasion for stylistic pirouettes?

2. Kelman's use of dialect

Kelman has been explicit about his literary intentions. He has agreed that one of his aims is to call into question a mode of writing based on an authoritative narrative voice:

> KM: You've stated that you are trying to obliterate the narrator, to get rid of the narrative voice.
> JK: Not every narrative voice, just the standard third party one, the one that most people don't think of as a 'voice' at all - except maybe the voice of God - and they take for granted that it is unbiased and objective. But it's no such thing.
>
> (McNeill 1989:4)

He aims for a true objectivity in his narrative 'so that nobody else is going to be oppressed or colonised by it' (ibid.)[2]. He cites Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh as exponents of the sort of narrative he wishes to avoid:

> none of them seems to have bothered working out that this 'third party voice' they use to tell their stories is totally biased and elitist, economically secure, eats good food and plenty of it, is upper middle-class paternalist.
>
> (op.cit.:5)

Turning now to the means by which he intends to achieve this aim of objectivity, we should note that *Nice to be nice* is in fact practically unique in Kelman's work. It is the only example (easily available) of the sustained use of non-standard dialect as a medium for prose narrative. An examination of some other short texts of his provides clues as to the true nature of his use of English as a literary language. In *undeciphered tremors* or *ONE SUCH PREPARATION* (in *Greyhound for breakfast*) for example, we find qualification and digression piling up on one another to the point where the text appears to risk losing any meaning it might have looked like having. The hedges and qualifications are specifically and inevitably written, standard forms, but here, by virtue of being largely emptied of meaning, they become symbolic of the linguistic authority Kelman criticises in the interview quoted above - one which prevails by form rather than substance.

In such short texts (and also in passages in the novels), we find a negative critique of the forms of public, standard, written narrative English style. Let us take his latest novel, *A Disaffection*, and examine its language to investigate the positive role of non-standard dialect in Kelman's writing.

It is certainly true to say that the novel is <u>not</u> written in standard English. Any page would give a dozen examples to demonstrate this. These include the use of dialect lexis and grammar, but rather little stock-in-trade orthographic mimicry. Here are the opening sentences:

> Patrick Doyle was a teacher. Gradually he had become sickened by it.
>
> (Kelman 1989:1)

This is as succinct an enunciation of the novel's *donné* as would be possible in twelve words. It is also an epitome of the stylistic variation the reader will find in the text. The linguistic contrasts between the two one-clause sentences - stative/dynamic; noun/verb; attribute/process - combine with the indeterminacy of reference of the final pronoun (cf. oral "I'm sick of it" or the near-phatic "It would sicken you, so it would" - suggestive of Bernstein's context-supported "restricted code") and are foregrounded to give a preliminary unsettling nudge to standard assumptions about the language of the literary

novel. We might think of the linguistic variation in this novel (and in the earlier *The Busconductor Hines*, and many stories) as taking place between three styles:

1. An unadorned style of description and narrative (briefly exemplified by the first sentence here), which seeks after a literal account of fact and action with a relentless scrupulousness. Of the three, this style can most easily be thought of as being in the dialect of "standard English".[3]

2. The everyday conversational language of the characters of the novels and stories - varieties of Glaswegian English/Scots. The second sentence of the example takes us in this direction, though its clipped brevity (no cause or further explanation is given) retains much of the factual quality of the first style.

3. The third style, or range of styles, is in the realm of parody and intertextual allusion. To this we shall return later, but can here point out that both the previous styles can move towards this pole at given points, or all three styles can converge in rapidly alternating succession.

One effect of these linguistic characteristics, as in the work of Gibbon discussed earlier, is to raise questions about the source of the narrative voice. In *A Disaffection* this issue is certainly problematic. The narrative voice is neither standard, nor even a constant alternative standard (e.g. a doggedly naturalistic mimicry of dialect speech). In the context of the options for use of dialect in the novel reviewed above, this narrative style has a significant literary function. Linguistically, the narrative voice is neither ours, the readers', nor the central character's, nor that of an identifiable and stable omniscient narrator. At some points the narrative does seem very closely to mimic the mental processes of Patrick Doyle:

> Amazing these coincidences in life. You could actually just be walking down the stairs and something totally amazing could happen to you. Such as? Away ye go.
>
> Such as?
>
> Away you go.
>
> (Kelman 1989:81)

This is reminiscent of the Bloom sections of Joyce's *Ulysses*, but the manner is more staccato and thus appropriate to the frenetic ratiocination which is Doyle's main mode of thought when alone. It is not possible, however, to accommodate the discourse of the novel to a scheme in which either the main character or another identifiable stable narrator speaks (as Trengove (1975) has argued is the case in Gibbon's *Sunset Song*). Just a few pages later we find a passage which seems to be no less imitative of Doyle's thoughts, as he considers his choice of breakfast food:

> He was a heart attack man and that was it finished....Yet okay, the thought of lettuce and cucumber and tomato, healthy portions of cheddar cheese; that had crossed his mind; he was thinking in these terms, maybe for tomorrow. I mean he wasni really that fucking interested in becoming a genuine vegetarian he just fancied getting fit.
>
> (Kelman 1989:85)

While the third person relation of a character's thoughts is a familiar enough literary recourse ('Free Indirect Thought (FIT)' in Leech and Short's (1981) terms), this reading is derailed by the irruption of the immediate and colloquial 'I mean', which is irreducibly suggestive of a present speaking voice. To paraphrase Trengove's question (1975), we are never allowed to become comfortably certain of who, exactly, is you, or he, or I. This uncertainty about the locus of the narrative voice is one of the central means by which Kelman continually brings into question its authority. This acts against its being set against the characters as an objective measure, whether linguistic (by presenting a consistent standard in contrast to the language of the characters) or moral (e.g., by providing a stable source of ironic commentary on character and action, with which the reader is encouraged to sympathise).

Another means used to bridge the gap between narrative and dialogue is the rejection of any orthographic device beyond taking a new line and indenting to signal direct speech. Speech thus becomes typographically all but indistinguishable from interior monologue. Whether something is said or merely thought thus has to be inferred from context. At times it becomes impossible to decide where (or whether?) one ends and the other begins. We might contrast this treatment of direct speech with Grassic Gibbon's, where the direct speech is italicised, but not enclosed in inverted commas. While he also wishes to avoid too rigid a break between narrative and dialogue, the mode of his narrative is more conventional and maintains enough distinction to avoid the ambiguity created by Kelman's sparser marking.

To further illustrate the three styles referred to earlier, and to show how they operate to constantly question the source of the narrative voice, we will consider a longer passage from *The Busconductor Hines*. Here Hines is considering the possibility of simulating a fall to give him an excuse for going home from work:

> All this would be worthwhile if only he could get home. Sandra would be there and would be there for a further 2 hours. It is not that a Hines should not work. A Hines should certainly of course work. He considers it good for the thing.
>
> The fall was rejected.
>
> Signing off sick in order that one may return home immediately is nothing less than a step to the rear, the which step belonging to the past and not the present. And the present should not be said to be yesterday. One of the more fascinating aspects of the lower orders is their peculiar ideas on time and motion. This used to always be being exemplified by the Busconductor Hines. He had assumed the world as a State of Flux. All things aboard the world are constantly on the move. Ding ding. Being an object aboard the world I am indeed on the go. As a method of survival it is marvellous. Hines can marvel.
>
> (Kelman 1985:85)

It should be noted, first of all, that the fundamental narrative logic throughout this passage is that of an interior monologue. First, a course of action is proposed and considered, only to be abruptly rejected, and then, in the subsequent elaboration on the decision, we get an indication of the reasons for this. This movement of thought, however, is negotiated through numerous changes of style. In the first two sentences of

the extract we find an apparently straightforward use of FIT, yet this gives way to the highly depersonalised and anomalous reference to generic 'a Hines', and the laws proper to him (it?). We may wish to consider this inflection a product of Hines own ironic self-contemplation, but this leads to a bizarre dissociation from self when 'He (Hines) considers it good for the thing (generic Hines)'. Again, the decision which is the pivot of the two paragraphs is ostensibly presented in the bald, factual style (no.1), yet it has a performative, as much as descriptive, force, reversing the earlier determination.

The following paragraph exemplifies a frequent recourse in such evocations of cogitation: a variation on a cliché which would not be implausible as an ironic conversational remark (here, 'a step to the rear' for "a step backwards") is developed to an extent far beyond what we would expect in informal speech. By the time we get to what is essentially the third version of the same idea ('The present should not be said to be yesterday.'), the boundaries of logic and comprehensibility are near to being breached. We then snap back into clarity, but find ourselves with a sentence reminiscent of social anthropology 'One of the more....'.[4] The text then veers back towards FIT only to emerge with "I am on the go" before another (self-?) objectification in "Hines can marvel".

To recall the earlier discussion of the "three styles", we can see in the passage just examined how the third, parodic and intertextual style emerges from a combination of elements of the first two. The dry, impersonal logic of the first style warps the hackneyed "step backwards" out of recognition, while the disorienting switches from first to third person, and impersonal narrative to FIT, feed off the conversational quirks of the character in question.

To choose just one case of intertextual allusive play as it occurs in the dialogue of the novel we could cite the parodic courtroom language in the following exchange about the failure of an inspector to censure a driver for leaving the terminus late:

> What d'you make of it? point for discussion?
> Could be. A strange kettle of parsnips.
> Exactly what I thought.
> Maybe he was asleep standing up.
> He was puffing a pipe.
> Did the witness see the actual smoke?
> No your honour. (op.cit.:62)

As a final example of the way in which the linguistic styles of the novel interact, we might take this further passage from *The Busconductor Hines* where Hines morosely contemplates the view of ageing tenements from his window:

> Better off razing the lot to the ground. And renting a team of steamroadrollers to flatten the dump properly, compressing the earth and what is upon and within, crushing every last pore to squeeze out the remaining gaseous elements until at last that one rectangular mass is appearing, all set for sowing. The past century is due burial; it is always been being forgotten.
>
> (op.cit.:168).

We shall set aside the biblical echoes and scientific-technical forms here. It is the last verb phrase which is most noteworthy for present purposes. While it is based on a non-standard form (the expansion of 'it's' to 'it is' rather than 'it has' - an example of a written non-standard form), the "standard version" ("It has always been being forgotten") is also anomalous - in Coseriu's (1967) terms it is an example of a systemically possible form which is not (or at best only marginally) part of the attested linguistic 'Norm'. The result is entirely appropriate to its purpose as an expression of the ending, yet never-ending, influence of the past on the present. What it is not is a sentence which can be classified as either "standard" or "non-standard" dialect. It exists in a literary space which is based on, yet independent of, both.

3. Conclusion

In Kelman's fiction there is a constant undermining of conventional assumptions about the language and narrative voice of the texts. He works within the linguistic forms made available by both standard and non-standard dialect, and across to other dialects and texts.

As a point of departure for further study of his literary style, it might be worthwhile to consider the similarities between his ('his') narrative voice and Alasdair Gray's autobiographical remarks:

> When I notice I am saying something glib, naïve, pompous, too erudite, too optimistic, or too insanely grim I try to disarm criticism by switching my midland Scottish accent to a phony form of Cockney, Irish, Oxbridge, German, American or even Scottish.
>
> (Gray 1988:1)

While this does not directly describe a literary use of language, it is not hard to see the similarity with the typical mode of discourse (whether spoken aloud or not) of Patrick Doyle and The Busconductor Hines and also with the typical mode of discourse of the narrative text which surrounds their utterances and is at times indistinguishable from them.

Kelman's fiction is written neither <u>in</u> standard nor non-standard dialect. We should rather say that it is written <u>out of</u> both.

Notes

1. The quotes indicate a rejection of the common (non-technical) usage which opposes "dialect(s)" to "standard language". In what follows, the distinction is to be understood as between "non-standard dialect" (here chiefly varieties of Scots/Scottish English) and "standard dialect" (the standard written variety of English used in unmarked narrative and descriptive writing). This terminology may be unsatisfactory and rather clumsy, not to say question-begging, but its validity for the discussion of the language of Kelman's fiction should be apparent.

2. Gibbon displays a similar attitude in his comments on the novels of John Buchan: 'when his characters talk Scots they do it in suitable inverted commas, and such

characters as do talk Scots are always the simple, the proletarian, the slightly ludicrous.' (Gibbon and MacDiarmid 1934:201)

3. Though if we examine the narrative prose of Kelman's other novel, *A Chancer* (written consistently in this "first style"), we will find that non-standard usages are evident even in this almost dehydrated form of the language, e.g.:'He was limping slightly when he arrived in the lounge bar that evening. Rab and Rena and Betty were sitting waiting on him.'(90).

4. *Roofsliding* in *Not not while the Giro* extends this idea to story length.

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